



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**
Sixtieth session

Summary record (partial)* of the 1278th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday, 17 February 2015, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Hayashi

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* No summary record was prepared for the rest of the meeting.

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (continued)

*Sixth periodic report of Gabon (continued) (CEDAW/C/GAB/6;
CEDAW/C/GAB/Q/6 and Add.1)*

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Gabon took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 10 to 14 (continued)

2. **Ms. Dikoumba** (Gabon), responding to questions raised at the previous meeting, said that the Government had introduced sex education programmes for girls and boys in order to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. The programmes were delivered through youth clubs within educational establishments in partnership with social services; peer-to-peer education for young people had also been developed. Public awareness campaigns were conducted throughout the country by the Government in partnership with development agencies and civil society organizations. All sex education programmes were coordinated by the National Committee for Reproductive Health and the Ministry to Combat HIV. A special youth affairs department was working with the relevant institutions to provide sexual and reproductive health services in the capital and throughout the country.

3. Child day-care facilities had been set up in order to encourage teenage mothers to return to school and to provide childcare for mothers seeking employment who could not afford a childminder. Literacy programmes had been established for rural and pygmy women and the Ministry of Human Rights ensured that all girls and boys were educated to become responsible citizens.

4. Abortions were permitted on the grounds of rape or incest and foetal impairment on the women's request. National awareness campaigns concerning teenage pregnancy and the burden it placed on young mothers were aimed at both boys and girls. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) worked with the Government to tackle HIV/AIDS and its possible feminization as a result of polygamy.

5. The Ministry of Education was working to improve the education system by reducing overcrowding in classes, improving training for primary and secondary school teachers and increasing their numbers and by providing specialized education within schools and universities that prepared students for employment. Education reforms included the removal of the ban on repeating a year of primary education and of the requirement to sit a secondary school entrance exam. Wider promotion of apprenticeship schemes had been introduced in order to improve school dropout rates while additional assistance was provided to girls and to children of illiterate parents who received no help with their schoolwork at home. Turning to the issue of the right to bank loans and other forms of financial credit, she said that the Government had set up a microcredit fund to encourage women's entrepreneurship, promote their employment and combat poverty.

6. **Ms. Pimentel** said that she wished to learn more about the support provided through schools to the children of illiterate parents. She noted that, in its replies, the Government had acknowledged that there was insufficient data on abortion-related maternal deaths. She asked what measures were being put in place in order to provide that data and, more generally, information on women's health.

7. **Ms. Zou Xiaqiao** asked what the budget allocation had been for education in the previous two years. She wished to know what specific measures and what public funding had been set aside in order to increase the number of schools and teachers and to improve the quality of school infrastructure and teaching.
8. **Ms. Acosta Vargas**, noting that the maternal mortality rate had improved somewhat, said that it was still very high. She wished to have clarification of the reasons for the improvement. Moreover, further details of the main causes of maternal mortality in the country were needed, especially as, according to the report of the State party, some 87 per cent of deliveries were assisted by doctors, midwives, nurses or skilled birth attendants.
9. **Ms. Dikoumba** (Gabon) said that maternal deaths were not all abortion-related. Most births took place in hospitals and the high number of maternal deaths could be attributed to a lack of prenatal care and to insufficient primary health care at the community level, including access to doctors, nurses and midwives. In order to encourage women to seek prenatal care, they were given a layette by a midwife when they visited their local hospital. More complications in childbirth could be avoided if expectant mothers took responsibility for their health and sought care throughout the pregnancy where possible. Programmes had been put in place to strengthen midwifery and to train women in rural areas as birth attendants. The health of mothers and their ability to look after their families was also impacted by the underlying economic performance of the country. The Government strategy included the introduction of mobile health teams for women who could not access hospitals in urban areas as well as the construction of regional hospitals specializing in maternal health. The Ministry of Health also supported health workers trained by the Gabonese Red Cross Society who provided primary health-care services in remote areas.
10. The National Health Insurance and Social Protection Fund assisted vulnerable families, including those in which illiteracy prevented parents from helping children with their homework. Literacy programmes were made available to parents. The education budget had increased from 70 billion CFA francs in 2005 to 191 billion CFA francs in 2012. The Government planned to build close to 400 new classrooms by 2020, to increase the recruitment of teachers and to improve the further training of teachers. Everything possible was being done to improve the education system.
11. **Ms. Pomeranzi**, citing reports that mechanisms for obtaining financial credit were not accessible to all women and that the percentage of female company managers in Gabon remained low, asked what was being done to tackle the discrimination faced by women entrepreneurs and overcome barriers to the economic empowerment of women.
12. **Mr. Bruun** enquired about the inheritance rights of women in customary marriages and asked whether rural women were recognized as landowners. He also wished to know what steps were taken to guarantee access to safe drinking water.
13. The delegation should indicate whether government plans to end its geographical isolation by 2016 by improving transport networks covered rural women and went beyond the building and upgrading of roads. Lastly, he would appreciate an evaluation of the success of the project to support the development of microcredit in Gabon.
14. **Ms. Gabr** asked whether the Government was cooperating with community leaders and NGOs in rural areas to change traditional mindsets and customs that were preventing women from exercising their right to landownership and access to credit and whether it had developed any specific strategies for the provision of basic health and other services in rural areas. She also wished to know whether women received training to help them adapt to new industries and agricultural innovations and whether any programmes were in place to enhance the quality of life of indigenous peoples.

15. **Ms. Dikoumba** (Gabon) said that the Government was aware of the pivotal role played by rural women in the primary sector and had spared no effort in drafting public policies to address their education and health needs. Since the early 1960s, it had been trying to merge small, scattered villages in order to provide basic services to remote areas more effectively, but had met with resistance from local communities who were deeply attached to their traditions and culture.
16. Under customary property law, women from certain ethnic groups who married outside their village or clan could not inherit land. To address the issue, the Government had embarked on land tenure reform involving the acquisition and redistribution of land by the State so that landownership would no longer be held by clans and families. It had also set up a programme to bolster the agriculture sector, called GRAINE (Gabon des Réalisations Agricoles et des Initiatives des Nationaux Engagés), by supporting the establishment of agricultural cooperatives.
17. Funding and training in accountancy and agricultural technology were provided through a range of programmes, including the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme. As a result, women were gradually adapting to the mechanization of agriculture and abandoning ancestral farming techniques. Moreover, the Gabonese Institute for Development Support encouraged good practices such as the exchange of seeds and banana and cassava plants.
18. In May 2014, an initiative had been launched to facilitate women's access to income-generating activities. A regulatory framework had been put in place, governing and steering bodies had been appointed and the composition and structure of a financing commission had been approved by decree. Provincial technical committees had been created to support project leaders in rural areas. As part of the second phase of the initiative, the Government had recently launched a call for sponsors.
19. Alongside such economic empowerment measures, the Government was also undertaking activities to boost female entrepreneurship. It had organized a seminar in 2012 and planned to hold forums to discuss possible strategies for the future.
20. Universal access to safe drinking water was recognized as a fundamental right and was one of the objectives of the Human Investment Strategy. Since 2010, the Government had been working to improve the provision of water and electricity in villages through the installation of pumps and solar panels, which would have a positive knock-on effect for female entrepreneurs engaged in agricultural production. To assist poorer households in urban areas, the Government had signed an agreement with the Gabon Energy and Water Corporation to reduce the cost of water and electricity by 25 per cent and allow staggered payments.
21. The Government had discussed the importance of changing mindsets in order to ensure that people made the most of the opportunities available to them. Gabon was a middle-income country whose economy was heavily reliant on oil. In recent years, in response to falling oil prices and government resources, steps had been taken to diversify the economy and promote a return to the land.
22. **Ms. Pomeranzi** said that she endorsed the vision set out by the representative of Gabon, but the desired results would not be achieved if there was no ministry with responsibility for implementing a strategy for development, especially the development of women's entrepreneurship. Women were the drivers of development, particularly at times of crisis. It was therefore particularly important to ensure that women enjoyed equal opportunities with men. It was also crucial that funds could be disbursed at the local level.
23. **Ms. Schulz** noted that the representative of Gabon had said that land had been made over to cooperatives, as a means of fairer land distribution. She asked how the Government

protected such ownership so as to ensure that land was not resold to large corporations or foreign investors, as a result of which, in many countries, communities had been dispossessed of their land. It was also important to ensure that rural women were not trapped into working for agricultural enterprises that controlled a business process from start to finish and maintained some control over what they planted and produced.

24. **Ms. Patten** said that the definition of sexual harassment set out in the State party's reply to question 13 of the list of issues was too restricted. Account should be taken of such factors as a hostile environment. She wondered whether there was still time to include a more comprehensive definition in the draft Labour Code.

25. **Ms. Dikoumba** (Gabon) said that the Government would take full account of the suggested improvement to the provision on sexual harassment in the workplace. With regard to the question of promoting the development of women in rural areas, she agreed that action must be taken to ensure that such women did not suffer from their interaction with international companies. As for land distribution, she said that many people living in national parks were authorized to engage in agricultural activities. The problem was that there was a risk that, on the death of her husband, a woman found that the land that she had worked, perhaps for many years, was claimed by her husband's family. Under the Government's plans, no one would be displaced and the land would be redistributed to those willing to work it. The National Agricultural Plan provided opportunities for both women and men. She added that big corporations could have a beneficial effect if they provided agricultural work for rural people.

Articles 15 and 16

26. **Ms. Schulz** said that, regrettably, the State party's reply to question 20 of the list of issues did not provide a full answer to the points raised. The discussion of the massive discrimination against women had started in 1997 and continued in a dialogue with the Committee in 2005. Various proposals had been made, but the situation of women in customary marriages seemed to be unchanged. According to her understanding, 50 per cent of couples were in a customary marriage, although the representative of Gabon had named a higher percentage at the previous meeting. A clear legislative framework was required to provide women and children with legal safeguards and she asked when the rights and obligations existing in civil marriages were available to those in customary marriage, with regard to inheritance, division of assets or choice of domicile. A number of articles of the Civil Code were particularly discriminatory. Under article 252, a husband was required to provide protection and a wife to show obedience. Under article 253, the husband was named head of the family and article 254 gave the husband the right to decide on the family domicile. Article 261 gave a husband the right to forbid his wife to work. Article 203 provided that the minimum age for marriage was 18 years for men but only 15 for women, or even less, if a special dispensation was granted by the President. Under articles 177 and 178, a monogamous marriage could be transformed into a polygamous one; 21 per cent of women were in polygamous marriages, usually with older husbands. Paragraphs 150 and 153 of the State party's report indicated the unwillingness of the parliament to change the law on polygamy and she asked what the priority was for the Government to eliminate the most discriminatory provisions in the Civil Code.

27. **Ms. Dikoumba** (Gabon) said that the Civil Code recognized both civil and customary marriage. Legislative action was under way to regularize customary marriage, but meanwhile the Government was reaching out to young girls through education, pointing out the difficulties involved in early marriage or polygamy. As for the percentage of women in customary marriages, the figure of 82 per cent that she had quoted at the previous meeting came from a study on widows conducted in 2012, based on a sample of 1,260 women. A number of respondents had said that they were widows, but in fact they were in

customary marriages. The figure given in the report was therefore correct. The problem with customary marriage was that, although it had been abolished in 1963, it was still recognized throughout the country, at every level of society. The Government had therefore decided to regularize such marriage in order to protect women. Currently a widow's welfare depended on the goodwill of her husband's family. Some remedies were, in fact, available to widows: the Ministry for the Family and the Advancement of Women had helped defray the costs of legal proceedings brought by one woman who had been left dispossessed. She acknowledged, however, that a number of provisions were discriminatory and the Government had introduced a bill to bring customary marriage into line with civil marriage. The bill was currently being discussed by the Council of State and a parliamentary committee. About 30 articles of the Code of Civil Procedure and the Code of Criminal Procedure had been revised and, following adoption by both houses of parliament, were awaiting promulgation by the President.

28. **Ms. Ondo Ndong** (Gabon) said that Gabon had not been inactive in seeking to eliminate discriminatory provisions: an interministerial commission had been examining the Civil Code with a view to changing provisions on polygamy and the age of marriage since 2005 and had made recommendations that had been put forward to the Council of Ministers in 2011. Unfortunately, the process had come to a halt following ministerial changes, and a new commission, chaired by the Ministry of Justice, had been established. Progress was being made, but it was very slow and the Government was considering a new strategy. It might adopt the approach of other countries, where questions of marriage were covered by a family code and a consultant had been hired to help draft such a code. It was unacceptable that, whereas the voting age was 18 years, a girl could be married at 15. The Government intended to take account of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

29. **Ms. Schulz** asked what the legal effects of the bill would be with regard to the right to inheritance, alimony, child support and distribution of assets. Secondly, she did not understand the logic of replacing certain provisions of the Civil Code by a family code.

30. **Ms. Dikoumba** (Gabon) said that the effect of the bill would be to give customary marriage the same legal force as civil marriage with regard to inheritance and other rights. The only difference between the two would be the ceremonies involved, where the choice would be left to the families concerned. The bill would provide for a declaration of marriage before the civil authorities, who would issue a marriage certificate. Gabon would, however, pay close attention to the Committee's comments. The process of changing the situation would be long and slow. It was a question of changing not just legislation but also attitudes. Gabon was fortunate in its President, who was an advocate of human rights.

The discussion covered in the summary record ended at 5.05 p.m.